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He is considered by many to be the father of psychoanalysis, which is a field of scientific research that studies the mechanics behind the human psyche. Freud gained popularity because of his radical theories detailing why we behave the way we do, many of these theories being sexual. A few of his most famous theories would be that of the conscious and unconscious mind, the "id, ego, and superego", and the Oedipus Complex.

Why is psychoanalysis so important in Literary Criticism?

If we focus only on the surface material presented to us we won't be able to fully understand a text. Character motivation and emotion are of the utmost importance to how stories progress. Therefore, we need to look beyond the obvious to truly comprehend the multiple layers of the text. This video shows what happens when you only observe a single aspect of something:

A Hamlet Psychoanalysis - Psychoanalytic Theory - Oedipus Complex in Hamlet

Hamlet confronts his mother in her bedroom, angry, and this could be interpreted as sexual frustration.

Hamlet compares pictures of Claudius and his father to his mother. It could be said he's doing this because he puts himself in his father's place and is jealous that Claudius gets to be with his mother in a way when he cannot.

If the ghost is indeed imaginary, then when the "ghost" told him to spare his mother from his revenge plot it shows his suppressed desire to eliminate his father but keep his mother to himself.

Ophelia and the Electra Complex

Hamlet's grief consumed him after his father's untimely death. In fact, he became so depressed that he started to be a danger to himself (i.e. when he droned about how he wanted to commit suicide). This is where his father's ghost comes in. Victims of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) often find themselves subjected to hallucinations in order to cope with their traumatic experiences. Hamlet seeing the ghost gives him a sense of purpose (a survival mechanism) and allows him to see his father again (a coping mechanism).

Ophelia is devastated by the death of her father. Since her mother is absent in the play, we as the audience can presume she's dead. This means that metaphorically her Electra complex (essentially the Oedipus theory but in reverse) was fulfilled. That is, her desire for her mother to be eliminated so that she could have her father all to herself. When her father is killed, by her "boyfriend" no less, she can't handle it and is consumed by her father's death until she dies.

What is psychoanalytic criticism?

Form of literary criticism, which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature.

Shakespeare's Psyche When Writing Hamlet:

The superego is in the forefront of Hamlet's conscious mind. It is what holds Hamlet back from killing his uncle. However, in the gravedigger scene we see that Hamlet is not affected by the skulls being taken out of

the ground. This is because his unconscious mind is consumed with all of these bloodthirsty impulses that he has become desensitized to the thought of death. In the gravedigger scene we see that this shift has taken place and he has transitioned from suicidal to homicidal now that he has let all of his unconscious desires take over.

Hamlet's Reason for Seeing His Father's Ghost: PTSD

What questions do a psychoanalytic critic ask?

The "conscious" part of your mind consists of what you're aware of in your lifetime. This also consists of memories. The "unconscious" part of your mind is composed of repressed feelings that influence your daily behavior even if you're unaware of it. Shakespeare's own father died as he was writing this play. Under the impact of this loss we can assume that Shakespeare's childhood feelings about his father had resurfaced. Shakespeare also lost his son, Hamnet, at an early age. This shows some obvious parallels to the main character's name "Hamlet." It also displays that the events in Hamlet not only tell a tragic story about a prince; but also the tragic story of Shakespeare and the subjects of his unconscious mind taking over. This story is a way for the audience to tap into his suppressed feelings that manifested themselves during and after these events.

Sophocles wrote a play in which a character named Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and has sex with his mother. This is why Freud named his theory the "Oedipus Complex" which states that sons have a repressed sexual desire to eliminate their fathers and have sex with their mothers.

The "id" is the primitive part of brains that wants to satisfy needs like food and sex. It also is in charge of the "fight or flight" reflex. The "ego" is the part of the brain that figures out realistic ways to satisfy those needs and handle dangerous situations. The "superego" is composed of the morals instilled in you by your parents and environment.

Points of reflection

- Are any oedipal dynamics or other family dynamics prevalent in the work?
- How do the characters behave?
- How can these behaviors, narrative events, etc. be explained in terms of psychoanalytic concepts?
- What does the work say about the author?
- Are there any drastic emotional shifts within the characters?